

Spring is a great time to get out and see Wildlife

by Robin West

As I look out my office window I am pleased to see the snow gone, leaves starting to emerge, and the grass starting to turn green. The real joy, however, is getting out and taking a walk through the woods. I just returned from a 45-minute stroll around Kenai National Wildlife Refuge's Keen-Eye and Centennial Trail loop and thought I would share the experience in prose. The trail is dry and the whole surrounding area is alive with the sights and sounds of spring. Most enjoyable is that those sounds do not yet include the buzzing of very many mosquitoes!

A loon greeted me with a mournful yodel as I walked down the hill and past Headquarters Lake. Soon I walked past a large cow moose, browsing a short distance from the trail in a willow patch, her belly heavy and swollen with what are certain to be twin calves to be born within the next several weeks. A short distance ahead I heard the hammering of a three-toed woodpecker, seconds before I saw him fly out from a beetle-killed snag. The resonating sound of his bill penetrating the hard tree trunk made him sound as though he should be the size of an elephant, rather than having a body no larger than my fist.

As I walked quietly past a small seasonal pond from melted snow on the muskeg, I noticed first the green iridescent head of a male mallard, then the drably colored female hiding close by in the weeds. Overhead, high in the air, a male snipe was circling producing his loud winnowing courtship call of, "who who who who who." A vole scrambled across the trail in front of me, hesitating for a moment beneath a piece of birch bark and then disappeared in nearby grass.

I walked for another few minutes listening to the mix of calls from thrushes, chickadees, and nuthatches. The call of the red-breasted nuthatch is

one of my favorites. While the bird is readily visible throughout much of the year at bird feeders, it seems rather shy in the forest, preferring to live high in the tree canopy. Its call, however, a high nasal, "yank, yank, yank" can be heard over long distances and reminds me of many enjoyable outings as a youth hunting and hiking in the Cascade Mountains of Oregon. The nuthatch call was a telltale sound of the pine and fir forests there.

Swinging back towards the office and Refuge visitor center I disturbed a male spruce grouse on the trail ahead. He flew up and landed on a limb in a nearby white spruce tree and rocked back and forth for a few moments before becoming still and allowing me to walk by. The last encounter with wildlife before I ended the walk, back at the Refuge parking area, was with a pair of bald eagles, one sitting on the top of a tree while the other soared overhead making its shrill cackling sound. The perched bird lifted off the spruce tree and joined its mate. They are likely the pair that return to nest year after year at the Refuge headquarters area, and are a welcome sign of spring.

I love the cool mornings of autumn, ripe berries, and a light frost on brightly colored fall leaves, but there is probably no better time to get outside and enjoy wildlife than in early spring. The forests literally come alive with new life; animals are trying to attract mates or preparing to give birth to young. Why not get out for a hike this week? If you don't want to travel far from Soldotna, why not try the trail system right behind the Refuge office?

Robin West is the manager at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.